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The CFR Task Force Report on “U.S. Education Reform and National Security”: A Reply and a Response

James Engell

I

During the last fifty years, America often has acted wisely to remain secure and to secure freedom for others. However, during that same time, significant failures of American foreign policy have stemmed from an ignorance of history, religion, culture, and language. These failures damaged national security, weakened the nation's economy, and added greatly to its debt. No matter what one's view of the Vietnam War, involvement in Nicaragua and El Salvador, sending marines to Lebanon, prolonged wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, America's role in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, or our comparatively small engagement with Africa while China pushes full bore on that continent, the mistakes involved in deciding to wage wars, promulgating long wars, and carrying out relations with unstable nations cannot trace their origins to technical, scientific, or entrepreneurial shortcomings, nor to failures of our public schools.

On the contrary, American technology and science have been at the forefront. The agony of Vietnam, its cost in more than 50,000 American and more than half a million Vietnamese lives; the nearly decade-long war in Iraq, its more than 700 American civilian and more than 4,450 American military lives lost (several times that in serious, debilitating injuries), as well as at least one hundred thousand Iraqi lives; the war of a dozen years in Afghanistan with more than 2,000 American lives lost (1,000 in the last two years); and the vast financial burdens of these undertakings, estimated for the second Iraq war alone at two trillion dollars and for Afghanistan at 500 billion: none of these deaths, costs, or debts can be attributed to an inferior level of scientific or technical knowledge, to a failure in innovation and entrepreneurial spirit, or to poor public schools.

One can counter that hindsight is twenty-twenty. However, at the time these decisions were made, informed and dissenting voices warned against them, or warned against the manner in which they were being executed. Many decisions proved misguided and costly. They required further intervention, expense, and sacrifice of life to mitigate or rectify.

In the last fifty years, individuals in power in both major political parties have made decisions about the use of power without adequate, operative knowledge of the *specific* histories, faith, cultures, and languages of many nations they engaged. (It is their education that we should be concerned about, too, as well as that of our students.) Yet, such knowledge was available and often presented to them. Some officials admitted errors. President Kennedy apologized for the failure of the Bay of Pigs. Robert McNamara later conceded that as Secretary of Defense he possessed fatal ignorance of Vietnamese history. President Reagan honorably apologized for the deaths of 241 marines he sent to Lebanon. President Clinton remarked that his biggest regret in foreign policy was not to confront genocide in Rwanda. Richard A. Clarke, once head of the Counter-terrorism Security Group and later the National Coordinator for Security, Infrastructure Protection, and Counter-terrorism, as well as chief counter-terrorism adviser on the National Security Council, apologized to "the loved ones of the victims of 9/11." Other officials have been stubborn in silence.

The point is this: the most costly and longest-lasting damage brought about by myopic decisions in foreign relations has been caused by relative ignorance of the way people elsewhere live, what they believe, the languages they speak, the values they hold sacred, and the particular history, *more remote as well as recent*, that motivates them. These subjects fall within the qualitative social sciences and the humanities—history, the study of religion, language, philosophy and ethics, and also the cultural arts, which represent all these subjects through the lens of specific and dramatic human experiences. The CFR report mentions history, enjoins attention to "world" or "global cultures," and promotes the study of languages. However, languages are discussed only as an instrument for "diplomatic, military, intelligence, and business contexts" (12), rather than *also* for understanding the customs, habits, values, and long histories of foreign nations, peoples, and their leaders. Furthermore, today's "strategic language" might well not be tomorrow's. Familiarity with a "local culture" is cited only as something that soldiers should know in order "to correctly read and assess situations they encounter" (12). Indeed, knowledge of cultures is strongly placed foremost in a military context (12). If policymakers themselves heeded such knowledge more, then perhaps soldiers would need it less often. Startlingly, the scenario in the Report seems to assume that an *imposed* American military presence within other sovereign states will constitute a regular feature of our foreign relations.

The study of world religions, repository of the deepest values of almost every culture and nation on Earth, is not mentioned once in the Report. As this is being written, a U.S. Army veteran has apparently shot and killed six Sikh worshippers at a temple north of Milwaukee in what the FBI is treating as an act of domestic terrorism. News sources indicate he was a white supremacist. In our country the history of crimes against Sikhs, Muslims, and, in the past, against Jews, Mormons, and Catholics, is long.

President Obama has recently announced a program for grades K-12 in which teachers

of STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) will be eligible for \$20,000 above their regular salary. This is good news, but there is sadly no parallel talk of increased funds for education in writing, reading, speaking, history, languages, culture, or the study of humans as religious beings, areas in which we fare no better (in some, arguably far worse) than our K-12 international performance in science and math.

II

Speculative and unscrupulous individuals operating in under-regulated environments, often trusting to sophisticated mathematical models and backed by highly technical knowledge, have perpetrated huge financial damage to this country, even fraud, and weakened the security of this nation. In addition, the purity of rational market theory has been refuted in real-world practice. These observations do *not* argue against free markets or capitalism. Rather, they argue for adequate regulation and against the myth that an unregulated market can promote or reward honesty and social conscience when it permits unscrupulous actors to thrive. Main Street has lost far more than Wall Street. Was this ethical?

Studies show that in our schools, public or private, student cheating, dishonesty, and plagiarism are on the rise. School administrators in many locations have themselves been caught cheating in order to make the performance of their students look better. Federal and other studies indicate that scientific misconduct and falsification of scientific data are increasing problems. A society without ethical education cannot expect either good government or real security, no matter what shape its laws take or how “reformed” its educational system. The damage done may come slowly but the rot is deeper. The Report says nothing about ethical or moral aspects of education.

The Founding Fathers of the United States all believed that human nature is inherently flawed and that, given opportunities, it will amass power and pursue monopoly. Madison’s *Federalist 10* is good reading on this subject, as are statements by Franklin (e.g., his final speech to the Constitutional Convention), Washington (e.g., his Farewell Address), and others who warned about the natural tendency of human beings to pursue power and wealth beyond the point where power and wealth corrupt. The entire scheme of American government with its checks and balances is predicated on preventing power from falling into the hands of any one faction in any branch for any prolonged period of time. Adam Smith warned against monopolies and urged behavior commensurate with fair and widespread social improvement, not the sharp enrichment of a small wealthy class. In most popular interpretations, his *Wealth of Nations* has been bastardized, and his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, which regards sympathy as a key to the long-term success of any society, has been ignored.

The Report is laudable in calling for renewed education in civics, yet such education should not be largely celebratory or purely informational. It should be also cautionary and

ethical. The original security of this nation, the organization of its government and the bedrock of its Constitution, were founded on the suspicion that tyranny and greed from within would constantly practice chicane and subterfuge: tyranny not only from external enemies, but *first* coming from our own proclivities. And education in civics should point out the long, often continuing struggles of disenfranchised groups in American society—those enslaved, women, subsistence wage earners, ethnic and religious minorities, those whose adult private sexual lives do not conform to the sexual lives of the majority, and the disabled. As the country has become more powerful, it has slowly but surely acted to remove barriers to full citizenship and equal rights. We are much stronger for it. Until all citizens not convicted of a crime enjoy *exactly* the same federal rights under the Constitution and Bill of Rights (and are subject to the same duties), our polity will continue to suffer.

III

Corporations and businesses rightly expect that American education will provide graduates with skills in math, science, communication, critical reading, and the ability to solve problems cooperatively and to think imaginatively. However, it is another matter to demand that high schools and colleges completely train graduates for a wide array of specific jobs, especially when the nature of those jobs is fast changing. In the last fifty years, large American corporations have, on the whole, reduced the percentage of their budgets spent on job training (exact figures depend on what are chosen as the initial and final comparison years). A lot has changed in corporate culture, including the assumption that most employees will stay with the firm for decades—too much downsizing and outsourcing. The real point is that some corporations, as John Kenneth Galbraith years ago predicted, now expect that American education should simply be a servant or handmaiden, saving them money in job training and producing not critical thinkers who might rock the status quo, but ready-to-work employees who will nevertheless not enjoy real job security, and whose innovations will often mean that they themselves will not hold patents for what they invent—their employers will.

If “informational texts” in the Common Core Standards indicate intellectual prose, then all the better. After many years in which schools and colleges have downplayed literature and its formative power, we should be enlisting more teachers to do what some have always done well, present human affairs and experience not as bare facts but as actions and motivations in complex contexts that always need to be interpreted. Every “informational text” cries out for interpretation. It is not a series of “take-away” or bullet points summarized in skeletal outline. Harry Truman urged anyone who cares about leadership to read history and biography. Edmund Burke believed the Greek tragedians as good a guide to historical tragedies of foreign and domestic relations as political study, and he saw the involvement

of Great Britain in its American War as a latter-day Greek tragedy. Lord North and King George did not listen to him. Jefferson studied rhetoric and moral philosophy at William and Mary and said that his teacher in that subject (as well as in mathematics), William Small, "probably fixed the destinies of my life." The Declaration of Independence is a document of the kind that Small and Jefferson's textbook in rhetoric advocated as the most irrefutable of statements, a syllogism whose major premise is a self-evident truth. Lincoln immersed himself in poetry and rhetoric, in literature, Shakespeare, and the Bible. Teddy Roosevelt loved literature and among presidents probably knew more poetry than any other. JFK praised Robert Frost and the power of the poet to critique power itself. In a more distant past, John Milton became a considerable political figure in his office as well as in his art; an understanding of the forces of rebellion, class inequalities, and human oppression might also be taken from William Blake, John Steinbeck, or Jane Addams. More recently, Ronald Reagan owed much to what William Wordsworth calls "the hemisphere of magic fiction." Reagan's work in radio, film, and television not only made him a marvelous communicator able to achieve intimate yet authoritative touch with the American people, it also opened him to the wider world of ideas and values. It is foolish to criticize him as an "actor" who read lines written by someone else. The modern arts of representation largely shaped his character. As a related point, ask young people around the world what they *most* admire and like about the United States today and the common answers embrace our movies, art, poetry, literature, and music. Such soft power is priceless, and it creates no deficit.

"Wild Bill" Donovan, head of the Office of Strategic Services in WWII and in WWI the recipient of the three highest military honors that the U.S. Army and Congress could bestow, including the Congressional Medal of Honor, read military history avidly. Yet his favorite reading was Shakespeare. When he visited a beleaguered England in 1940 to speak with M15 and the Head of M16 (and also bumped into a British intelligence officer by the name of Ian Fleming—the oo Ian Fleming), he gathered valuable information for FDR. On his return to the United States, the British Air Force tucked him in his transatlantic boat plane with a bottle of champagne and a volume of the writings of Edmund Burke. Later, when America entered the war, Donovan and the novelist Pearl S. Buck warned FDR against the internment of Japanese Americans. He ignored their advice.¹

IV

It is salutary that the Report mentions imagination and the emphasis of the 9/11 Commission Report on that quality of mind and feeling. Yet in this respect the CFR Report seems to miss more than half the game. After stating the obvious, that students should "develop their imagination from an early age" (47), it gives no example how this might be done—by the creative and performing arts, perhaps?—and then immediately discusses only patents

and inventions (47). These are indeed vital. One of Abraham Lincoln's most amazing (and little known) speeches is specifically on patents and inventions, still worth reading. Lincoln himself held a patent for lifting boats over shoals on navigable waterways, the only patent ever held by a US president. We need more patents and inventions, as well as the ability to capitalize on and manufacture them.

Yet, emphatically, this is *not* the kind of imagination that the 9/11 Report laments was absent in the time prior to that tragedy. It is an unimaginative misreading of the 9/11 Report to think so. When the 9/11 Commission Report decries a lack of imagination, it points not to a failure to invent devices or software needed to solve specific problems or to facilitate greater ease and productivity. Rather, it points to a failure to construct possible outcomes from the welter of current events, information, and capabilities at hand, not a technical failure but an imaginative and cooperative failure. Here imagination means constructing and sharing a narrative of possible events, inventing or imagining not new material goods or technical devices but foreseeing the possible results of human motives and actions gleaned from extensive intelligence, and then actually heeding those narratives. This is something that can be done only through considerable reading and reflection in history, psychology, biography, and narrative art. It is precisely deep practice in reading and in producing narrative art through language or film that develops an imaginative ability to "connect the dots."

To say, as the Report does, that "short essay exams *might* still have a *limited* place" in student assessment (48, emphasis added) elevates information or sheer mechanical skill above information and skill viewed critically and placed in the service of complex judgments. Apparently, even essays of modest length are anathema, for they actually take time to read, correct, criticize, and revise. Instead, "more technologically advanced assessments that simulate real-world applications" are urged. It is not stated what these are. They apparently do not require genuine judgment, or much painstaking time for the teacher to assess. They represent problem solving handled mechanically or by automated grading—in other words, with no imagination. Used exclusively, such student assessment is exactly what authoritarian governments relish.

v

One of the permanent and now fastest growing areas of national security—the Pentagon knows this if no one else does—is environmental security regarding food, water, climate, rare earths, energy sources, pollutants, and more. This pertains to environmental conditions globally and within the United States, with focus on hot spots. One cannot grasp the possible future of Africa without grasping its environmental fragilities. And one cannot approach the Middle East or Pakistan—or the American west and southwest—without carefully studying water scarcity and floods. The melting of Arctic ice is another case in

point. Though this may provide a new race for fossil fuels and minerals under an ocean previously covered with thick ice, burning fossil fuels is intensifying droughts, enlarging floods, expanding wildfires, and creating more extreme natural events. Nevertheless, we do not give students sufficient education in environmental study. Few schools require it. The CFR report never mentions it. Students often do not learn the science of largely human causes of climate change now forcing accelerated species extinction and extremes of temperature, rainfall, and violent storms, as well as a generally hotter climate.

Many schools also do not present to students the practice of personal, preventive health care, or the extent to which human pollution and environmental degradation increase many cancers. Cancer strikes one in three Americans. The president's national cancer panel, its members having been appointed by President George Bush, reported to President Obama in 2010 that environmentally caused and environmentally linked cancers are "grossly underestimated," and that carcinogens in our environment cause "grievous harm." It may sound naïve to state, yet it's a hard fact that our security is also weakened by an alarming increase in childhood diabetes and by a national epidemic of obesity. These two conditions sap military preparedness by limiting the pool of those qualified for service and they damage the economy by adding billions of dollars in health-care costs and by diminishing labor productivity.

From the past, Teddy Roosevelt provides an excellent model of a public figure deeply concerned with conservation, health, and the environment. He was militant against the power of monopolies and large industrial complexes, yet unafraid to promote American greatness, physical vigor, and competitive spirit.

Next Generation Science Standards and National Science Education Standards (National Research Council) offer one hope that science education will improve. As with Common Core standards in other subjects, these are taken up state by state and do not reflect a federal mandate. Yet, a nation in which nearly half the population believes that evolution is a largely untested theory, one to be rejected or "balanced" with other views such as intelligent design, is doomed to an attitude toward *all* science that will produce clear mediocrity and damage our security: we cannot pick and choose what science we support. At present, a ballot initiative in Missouri, if passed, would permit any student in public school to skip science lessons—or lessons of any kind—that the student could persuade authorities was somehow infringing on personal religious beliefs. This initiative would also apparently prohibit any teacher from assessing students' written or oral work in any subject, including science, in a way deemed to discriminate against the "religious content of their work." If personal religious belief is accepted *as part* of science—as part of *any* subject—true assessment is crippled if not impossible.

A country in which human-caused climate change is still openly “debated,” as if it were a mere hypothesis, as if the evidence were roughly equal on both sides, or as if thousands of international scientists were conspiring to foist it on a credulous world in order to gain grant money, cannot hope to execute wise policies. Nor can it hope to maximize the industry and profit from sources of alternative and renewable energy.

Blindness in our public acceptance of basic scientific results—results that the rest of the educated world has accepted after repeated scrutiny—a blindness often acquiesced to and even reinforced by public officials, has already cost the nation in disease prevention, agricultural production, sustainable resources, and, most troubling, in respect for the procedures and results of science itself. Such willful ignorance, masquerading as the legitimate skepticism practiced by genuine science, has negative impacts on our economy, foreign relations, and security. With time these impacts will deepen.

VI

The Report laudably points out the dearth of good educational opportunities for many citizens with lower incomes. A lack of social mobility increasingly grips the nation. However, rather than rely heavily on privatization of K-12 schools as a preferred solution, the root causes of middle and lower income stagnation and growing inequality might be an equally valid (or better) target. Moreover, at the post-secondary level, as recent Congressional investigations led by Senator Tom Harkin have demonstrated, it is shocking the amount of federal educational loans that end up in the coffers of for-profit educational institutions (i.e., companies) whose graduation rates run from the disastrous to the dismal, and whose job placement records are spotty. Executives heading these “institutions” often enjoy multi-million dollar salaries.

It is telling that multiple “Additional and Dissenting Views,” constituting ten of sixty-six pages in the CFR report proper, almost all criticize the heavy emphasis in the Report on shortcomings of public schools. These additional and dissenting views come primarily from individuals who have lived and worked as teachers in several different kinds of educational institutions (not just public schools), and who have often studied American education and its history with diligence and care.

In the late 1970s I spoke with Archibald MacLeish at his farm in western Massachusetts. He expressed concern that our national policies and the individuals responsible for our security were drifting away from principles of humanity and practical judgment embodied in historical, philosophical, and literary texts, fiction and non-fiction. He happened to state this while Jimmy Carter was in office, but he had in mind a trend of some decades. MacLeish

also worried that academic humanists, retrenching in the academy, were drifting away from public service and no longer viewed their subjects as part of a wider public inheritance with practical as well as aesthetic value. His worries, justified on both accounts, could be discounted as coming from a poet and literature professor. He won the Pulitzer Prize (for poetry and drama) three times; as Librarian of Congress he re-organized that institution; at Harvard he taught as Boylston Professor of Rhetoric; he won a Tony and an Academy Award, too. However, before that discount gets deep, it's helpful to recall that he spent his early career as a superb lawyer. He later wrote extensively for *Fortune*. In WWII he served as Director of the War Department's Office of Facts and Figures and as Assistant Director of the Office of War Information. He became Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs and represented the United States at the creation of UNESCO. For both international relations experts and humanists, his worry over the growing split in our society between STEM subjects and economics and politics on the one hand, and humanistic learning on the other hand, is worth heeding.

All this is to say, yes, we desperately need more cyber security experts; we need more engineers; we need more scientists, a populace much more science literate, and better teaching of science and math in K-12 and colleges. We need to study foreign languages and cultures for business and military use. We need more entrepreneurs to apply knowledge and provide solutions to specific problems. Yet, even if we have all that, it will do only limited good and may even at some junctures do harm if we do not also have individuals who know the deep history and culture of other nations and of their own (and not simply since WWII or 1980), and the faiths and languages of other cultures as well as of our own, not for trade and the military purely but for a capacious grasp of other beliefs, social systems, and values. Our students should, in written and spoken communications, be able to articulate well-crafted judgments that reflect insight into human motivation and character. They should immerse themselves in the narrative arts. Ideally, many students will gain acquaintance with several areas: science, math, history, economics, civics, ethics, the arts and the humanities. A high level of technology brings advantages and greater prosperity, at least for many, yet a high-tech society and its military remain remarkably vulnerable to low-tech weapons and tactics. A high-tech society also remains prone to growing inequalities and to arrogance. In the last fifty years this is what experience has clearly shown.

There is a much in the CFR report to support. It is what the Report leaves out—and the resulting imbalance that the Report promotes—that is distressing. This is not a question of either/or, that is, of either the specific vision that the Report articulates or the more encompassing vision expressed here. We can and should have *both*. We cannot be a secure, leading nation without excellent scientific, mathematical, engineering, medical, and technical

education. We cannot be great without being utterly practical. Yet, we cannot and will not be a secure, leading nation without prizing and applying the knowledge, skills, and judgment gained from pursuing the lessons of history and culture, the lessons of languages as embodiments of beliefs and values, the lessons of world religions, the hard-won lessons of close reading and careful writing, and *all* the lessons of science. We cannot be great without cherishing and following ideals.

The author is aware of no personal or family financial interest, conflict of interest, or potential conflict of interest in any of the views expressed here.



NOTE

- 1 Douglas Waller, *Wild Bill Donovan* (New York: Free Press, 2011).